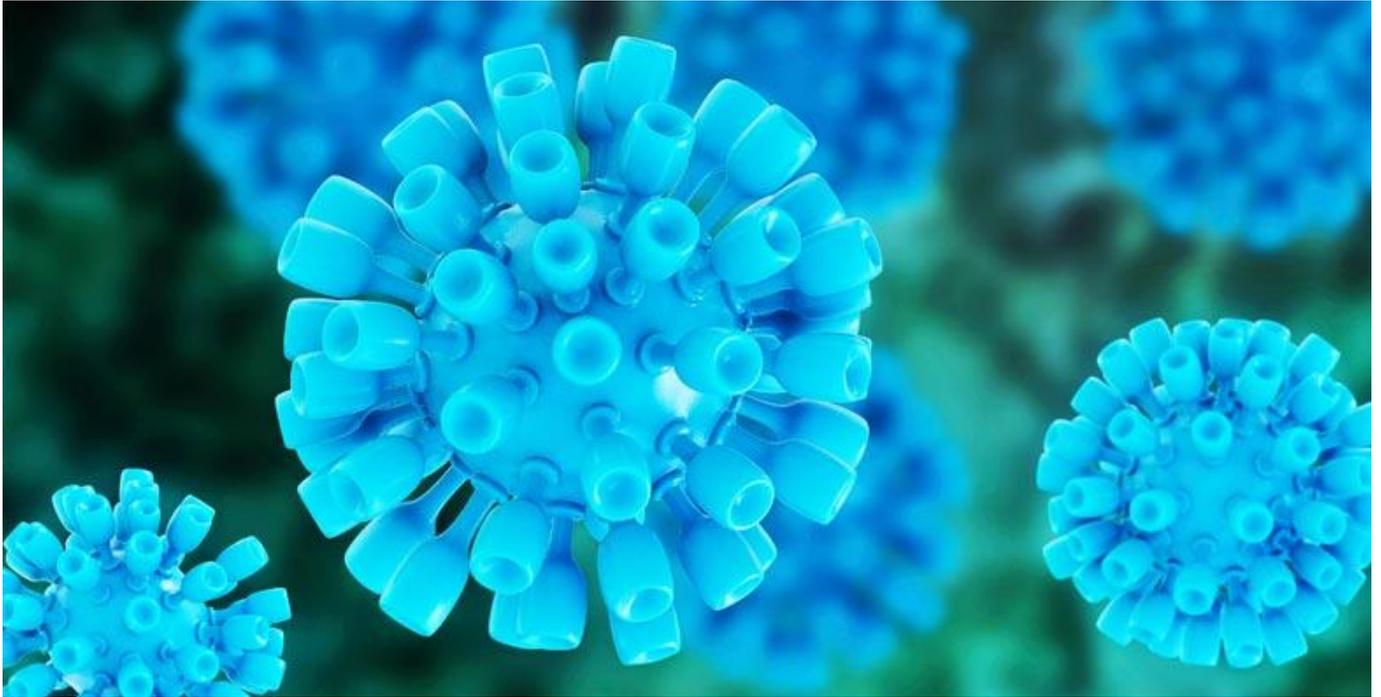


# Hepatitis C symptoms & treatment



## FAST FACTS

- Hepatitis C is found in infected blood (it's very unlikely, but not impossible, that it can be passed on in semen).
- Hepatitis C is mainly passed on through using contaminated needles and syringes or sharing other items with infected blood on them. It's also a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can be passed on through unprotected sex, although this is less common.
- Hepatitis C can be prevented by never sharing needles and syringes; practising safer sex including using male and female condoms, dental dams and latex gloves; and avoiding unlicensed tattoo parlours and acupuncturists.
- A simple blood test carried out by a healthcare professional will show whether you have hepatitis C.
- Most people don't need treatment for *acute* hepatitis C. If it develops into *chronic* hepatitis C, treatment is available to reduce the risk of further complications such as liver damage.

*If you've had unprotected sex, or you're worried about hepatitis C or other STIs, get tested as soon as possible - even if you don't have symptoms.*

## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C - hep C or HCV - is part of a group of hepatitis viruses that causes inflammation of the liver - which is when your liver becomes swollen and painful.

## Is hepatitis C serious?

Hepatitis C can be serious and, without appropriate treatment and care, can cause liver disease and liver cancer leading to death.

## How do you get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C can be passed on easily and you can get it if you:

- share contaminated needles and syringes during recreational drug use
- are exposed to unsterilised tattoo, body-piercing or medical/dental equipment (occasionally you can get it from sharing a towel, razor blades or a toothbrush if there is infected blood on them)
- have unprotected sex (sex without a condom or dental dam), including vaginal, anal and oral sex with someone who has hepatitis C (even if they don't have symptoms)
- share sex toys that aren't washed or covered with a new condom each time they are used
- practise anal sex, rimming, fingering or fisting without condoms, dental dams or latex gloves
- receive a transfusion of unscreened blood and blood products
- are a pregnant woman with hepatitis C you can pass the virus on to your unborn baby.

## Hepatitis C, HIV and sexual health

- Having an STI, including hepatitis C, increases your risk of getting HIV. This is because most STIs cause sores or lesions that make it easier for HIV to enter the body.
- Because they are passed on in similar ways, some people have both viruses, which is known as co-infection.
- If you're living with HIV and also have hepatitis C, your viral load is likely to increase because your immune system is weaker. This will make you more likely to pass on HIV if you have sex without a condom.
- Hepatitis C is rarely passed on during heterosexual sex – it's more common for it to be spread sexually among men who have sex with men who are living with HIV.
- If you're taking antiretrovirals, it's important to discuss with your doctor how treatment for hepatitis c may interact with your HIV drugs.

*If you're worried about HIV infection, find out everything you need to know in our [HIV Transmission and Prevention section](#)*

## How do you protect yourself against hepatitis C?

- Never share needles and syringes or other items that may be contaminated with infected blood, such as razors, toothbrushes, towels or manicure tools (even old or dried blood can contain the virus).
- Only have tattoos, body piercings or acupuncture in a professional setting, and ensure that new, sterile needles are used.
- Practise safer sex:

- Know the status of any sexual partner.
  - Male (or external) or female (or internal) condoms and/or dental dams aren't usually necessary to prevent hepatitis C for long-term heterosexual couples, but it's a good idea to use them when having anal sex (in case there is minor bleeding), or if blood such as menstrual blood is present; or for sex with a new partner.
  - for men who have sex with men – use condoms, dental dams and latex gloves for anal sex, rimming, fingering and fisting.
- There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

*Note – apart from condoms – other types of contraception such as the contraceptive pill offer no protection against sexually transmitted infections.*

*Ask your healthcare professional if you need further advice on how to protect yourself and your partner(s) from HIV and other STIs.*

## What do hepatitis C symptoms look like?

Hepatitis C infection can go through two stages: *acute* and *chronic*. In the early – acute –stage most people don't have any symptoms and don't know they have it until the liver has been significantly damaged.

For women and men acute (or short-term) symptoms include:

- flu-like symptoms, including tiredness, fever and aches and pains
- feeling and/or being sick
- loss of weight/appetite
- itchy skin
- tummy (abdominal) pain
- mental confusion (often called 'brain fog') and depression - these are specific to hepatitis C.

Acute hepatitis C infection doesn't always become chronic, but if it does, you often don't notice any symptoms until the virus has damaged the liver enough to cause the signs and symptoms of liver disease including:

- bleeding and/or bruising easily
- tiredness
- loss of weight/appetite
- jaundice, meaning your skin and the whites of your eyes turn yellow
- dark urine (pee)
- Itchy skin
- fluid build-up in your tummy (abdomen)
- swollen legs
- confusion, drowsiness and slurred speech

- spider-like blood vessels on your skin.

## Can I get tested for hepatitis C?

Yes - a simple blood test carried out by a healthcare professional will show whether you have the virus. You may also be given an extra test to see if your liver is damaged.

*If you've got hepatitis C you should be tested for other STIs. It's important that you tell your recent sexual partner/s so they can also get tested and treated. Many people who have hepatitis C do not notice anything wrong, and by telling them you can help to stop the virus being passed on; and it can also stop you from getting the infection again.*

## How is hepatitis C treated?

The majority of people with hepatitis C don't need treatment. However, you will need regular check-ups for three months to see if your body is fighting the virus.

For people who develop a chronic infection, there is treatment, and people with chronic infection do not necessarily develop liver damage.

If you've already got hepatitis C, it's advisable to have the vaccination against hepatitis A and B to protect your liver from further damage.

*Whether you have symptoms or not, don't have sex until your healthcare professional says you can.*

*It's usually possible to cure hepatitis C, but you're not immune to future infections - which means you can get it again. You can also still get other types of hepatitis, and having hepatitis C together with another type is more serious.*

## Complications of hepatitis C

- As with most STIs, hepatitis C puts you at risk of other STIs, including HIV.
- Without treatment a pregnant woman with hepatitis C can pass it on to her unborn baby.
- Without treatment, chronic hepatitis C can cause scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), which can cause the liver to stop working properly. A small number of people with cirrhosis develop liver cancer and these complications can lead to death. Other than a liver transplant, there's no cure for cirrhosis. However, treatments can help relieve some of the symptoms.

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Last full review:

03 July 2018

Next full review:

02 July 2018



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